

Myths and Realities About Women in Nontraditional Jobs

Myth:

Blue-collar or heavy, physical labor is nontraditional for women.

Reality:

Many jobs considered nontraditional for women today have been traditional jobs for women in the past. Women worked in all phases of production, transportation, and communications work during both world wars. Women textile workers were the nation's first factory workers and the first to organize their workplaces. Before industrialization and since, women have done heavy labor alongside men on the farm in the fields. Native American women in some tribes were responsible for constructing the home and managing other tasks that both men and women today would find physically difficult.

Myth:

Women are not strong enough to do heavy labor.

Reality:

Many blue-collar jobs are more physically demanding than pink-collar jobs, but there are several things to keep in mind:

1. Many nontraditional jobs are not as physically demanding as housework; some are less so.
2. Low-paying service jobs in fields dominated by women (e.g., waitress or nurse) are often physically difficult. These jobs pay far less than a lab technician's job, which is much less physically demanding.
3. The average woman is less powerful than the average man, but some women are stronger than some men. Also, of women that are given equal physical challenges in school and in athletics, in general they may perform equally well. Women have excellent lower-body strength and, with proper weight training, can improve upper-body strength to perform lifting tasks.
4. Some employers develop exaggerated test for physical strength that do not match the job requirements. This may prevent some minorities and females from entering the trade or occupation. Guidelines have been set by the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to prevent this.
5. Mechanization has lessened the physical demands in many jobs, such as heavy equipment operator. This will continue to be true in the future.

Myth:

Nontraditional jobs, especially jobs like construction, are too dirty, noisy, and dangerous for women.

Reality:

It is cultural conditioning that keeps women away from blue-collar jobs, not dirt and grease. Nontraditional jobs are often dirty, sometimes dangerous, and sometime unhealthy. Anyone considering a nontraditional job should consider her readiness for these eventualities. But also consider that diapers, often a component of a housewife's job are dirty and smelly too. There are also health hazards in traditional jobs, such as radiation from cathode-ray tubes (CRTs). These hazards must be put into perspective and weighed against the benefits.

Myth:

A woman's place is in the home, not on a construction site.

Reality:

Most women will work, on the average, 30 years of their lives, regardless of whether or not they marry. Women will make up the majority of workers entering the work force between now and the year 2000.

Women accounted for over 44 percent of all persons in the civilian labor force in 1985. Among these, half of all black workers were women, 44 percent of all white workers were women; and 39 percent of all Hispanic workers were women. Work is a reality for women, and they are working due to economic need.

Nearly two thirds of all women in the labor force in March 1985 were either single (25 percent), divorced (12 percent), widowed (5 percent), separated (4 percent), or had a husband whose 1984 earnings were less than \$15,000 (17 percent).

Myth:

Women cannot do the same work as men because they do not work as long or as regularly as their male co-workers. They miss too much work due to children's illness and pregnancy.

Reality:

Labor Department studies have shown that highly trained women and minorities who occupy responsible and skilled positions are seldom absent more than white men in similar jobs. Taking into account both acute and chronic ailments, men and women 17 years and over have virtually the same absentee rates. Women over 45, in fact, are out sick substantially less often than men their age. On the average, absentee rates are highest for people in low-level jobs, regardless of sex.

Myth:

Women will lose their femininity if they work in a trade.

Reality:

Women need to be physically prepared for physical jobs, but there is nothing unfeminine about being physically fit.

Myth:

Women will leave a job to get married and have children; therefore the job should go to a man, who will stay.

Reality:

Again, the Department of Labor states that a declining number of women leave work for marriage and children. Even when they do leave, a majority of women return once children are in school and, with this break, still average 30 years in the workforce. Labor turnover studies also show that net differences in turnover for men and women are small.

Myth:

Married women who have husbands to support them should stay home and leave high-paying jobs open for men.

Reality:

Wives in the labor force contribute substantially to family income. The proportion of married-couple families with the wife in the paid labor force rose from about 40 percent in 1972 to 54 percent in 1984. In that year, the median income of married-couple families with the wife in the paid labor force was \$34,668 compared with \$23,582 for married-couple families in which the wife was not in the paid labor force.

Even if all married women stayed home and men filled their jobs, millions of jobs would still be unfilled. A full 17 percent of the women in the labor force are married women whose husband earn less than \$15,000 per year.

Myth:

Women on a job site make it difficult for men to concentrate; women are too distracting due to their gender.

Reality:

If men cannot concentrate on the job, then perhaps they should consider other work.

The majority of victims of sexual harassment are women, so harassment, especially in a nontraditional job, is a reality for women. However, it is the harassing behavior that is the problem and must be stopped, not women's entrance into the workplace.

Myth:

Certain jobs are “men’s work” and other jobs are “women’s work.”

Reality:

Attitudes about which jobs are appropriate for men and which ones are appropriate for women are the result of tradition and socialization. The vast majority of job requirements are unrelated to sex.

Myth:

Women do not have the mechanical or mathematical aptitude for skilled-trade work.

Reality:

A study conducted by the Johnson O’Connor Research Foundation Human Engineering Laboratory found no difference between men’s and women’s scores in 14 of 22 aptitude tests. Women excelled in 5 of the remaining tests, and men excelled in 2. The researchers concluded that “in most occupations, if positions were based solely on aptitudes, men and women would be found in approximately equal numbers.” They found nothing in women’s skills or potential to justify the current patterns of employment.

Myth:

Women are in the labor force to earn some extra spending money.

Reality:

The majority of women work because of economic need. In March 1988, 58.5 percent of women in the labor force were either single (25 percent), divorced (12 percent), widowed (4 percent), separated (4 percent), or had husbands whose annual 1987 earnings were less than \$15,000 (13.5 percent).

Myth:

Women and men are represented equally in most occupations.

Reality:

Women workers are concentrated in traditionally female occupations. In 1989, women represented 80 percent of all administrative support (including clerical) workers, and 68 percent of all retail and personal services workers, but only 9 percent of all precision production, craft, and repair workers and 7.2 percent of all apprentices.

Myth:

Jobs in which women are traditionally employed pay salaries comparable to jobs in which men are traditionally employed.

Reality:

Jobs in which men are traditionally employed typically pay 30 [percent more than traditionally female jobs.

This document was originally developed by Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) and may be adapted for use with an acknowledgment to WOW.